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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the range and types of distance education on which information is potentially available. Different types of institutions involved in distance education are identified, and the major concerns of distance teaching institutions worldwide are briefly examined. Information users and their information needs are identified, and types of primary and secondary information are described. Finally, problems of access are discussed together with some solutions, with particular reference being made to the experience of the International Centre for Distance Learning. Sources of information to satisfy user's needs include institutions which operate distance teaching programs and college libraries. The former generates prospectuses, handbooks, or calendars designed to guide students in their choice of courses, as well as data on students that may be used for research for internal purposes; the latter provides access to databases as well as printed materials. (DB)

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INFORMATION WORK IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

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Since the term 'information' is used so frequently, and so loosely in so many contexts, it is necessary to indicate at the outset precisely what areas are dealt with in this paper. We first of all try to outline the range and types of distance education on which information is potentially available. We identify some of the different types of institutions involved in distance education and then briefly examine some of the major current concerns of distance teaching institutions worldwide. Next, we look at who are the information users and what are their needs. Types of primary and secondary information are described. Finally, problems of access are discussed together with some solutions, with particular reference being made to the experience of the International Centre for Distance Learning.

It becomes progressively more difficult to categorise distance teaching institutions. As time goes on national requirements change and the nature of distance education provision also changes; in addition distance education becomes more and more widely accepted as a means of teaching. In Australia, for example, a thorough-going rationalisation of higher education provision has resulted in dramatic changes (described below) being made to a long-established pattern of provision. In many countries the acceptance of distance education is demonstrated by its being employed as one component alongside face-to-face components as part of open learning or flexible learning provision.

A rough categorisation of institutions teaching at a distance is still worthwhile, in spite of the fact that it becomes progressively more difficult. The most familiar type of institution to the present audience is probably the autonomous, degree-granting distance teaching university, of which at least twenty examples are currently operating in various parts of the world, many in Asia. In addition to universities, there are many other examples of single-

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mode, i.e. distance teaching only, institutions. Two notable examples which are not designated as universities although they both offer degree-level courses are the Hong Kong Open Learning Institute and the Open Learning Agency, Canada (OLA). OLA also teaches vocational and basic education courses.

There are other examples of single-mode institutions which have vocational orientations, such as the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand and the Open Polytechnic, newly established in the United Kingdom. All the above institutions are maintained by public funding; there are many more examples of privately supported single-mode vocationally-centred distance teaching institutions.

There is also a long tradition of single-mode provision of distance teaching at secondary and primary levels, particularly in New Zealand, where a national institution teaches at both levels, and in Australia and Canada, where provision is undertaken by a series of state and provincial institutions. In Europe, Spain has for many years operated national primary and secondary distance teaching institutions as well as a distance teaching university.

A second model, of dual-mode institutions teaching both face-to-face and at a distance, is exemplified by Australian and Canadian universities. The old Australian External Studies departments have, however, been reorganised in the recent overhaul of higher education provision. The reorganisation has determined that they be replaced by a series of eight designated distance education centres, following a series of institutional amalgamations.

Many other variants could be identified, but to generalise grossly, a third category of institution is the face-to-face teaching institution which has introduced a distance-taught programme or course within a particular department. Many examples could be chosen; in the United Kingdom, for example, at least seven institutions offer a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree. In many instances, this is the only distance-taught programme which the institution offers.

It has to be said that every institution, whatever subjects it teaches at a distance at whatever level, has its own particular aims and objectives and its

own particular set of parameters within which it is obliged to operate. At the same time, given those inevitable differences, there is much information and much experience which can be usefully drawn upon by practitioners with widely differing backgrounds from institutions very different from their own.

There are several areas of particular concern to many distance teaching institutions at present. In Africa, for example, a common concern is in relation to teacher education. The number of students in primary education and ambition to progress beyond this level greatly exceeds the number of qualified teachers. This problem is particularly severe in Africa but is widespread throughout developing countries.

The desire to strengthen ailing economies points to the need in many countries to provide courses in business studies and in technical subjects. In addition, the 1990 Unesco Education for All Conference in Jomtien, Thailand, focussed attention on the needs of school-age students and adults alike in basic education. Recent political events have also created considerable new demands. In Eastern Europe, for example, education systems in some countries are being totally rebuilt, tasks which can only be achieved through the use of distance education. The teaching of languages has become particularly crucial both in those Eastern European countries where teachers of English are now required instead of teachers of Russian, and in Western Europe, where the single market will come into effect in 1992.

Who are the users of information and what are their needs? The answers to these questions will, we hope, to some degree already be emerging from what has been said above. Many categories of information user can be identified; any practitioner involved in a particular facet of distance education may be interested in seeking information from which to learn about the experience of counterparts in other institutions. In our experience, the following are the categories of information user most frequently encountered; planners of new distance teaching institutions (often from education ministries) and of new distance-taught programmes being introduced in conventional institutions; academic and editorial (instructional design) staff responsible for creating new courses; media specialists responsible for producing non-print components of distance-taught courses; tutors, counsellors and others involved in providing support services for

students; researchers; trainers; and postgraduate students, an increasing number of whom are studying distance-taught courses on distance education, are writing dissertations on particular aspects of distance education, and are studying distance education components within more general programmes. This range of users have widely disparate interests, but certain generalisations can be made about their needs. Requests for information, regardless of the nature of their source, tend to reflect a desire to know what exists in terms of distance education provision, what can be learned from the experience of others in the field, and what can be learned from the results of research.

What sources exist to satisfy users' needs for these types of information? Each individual institution which operates a distance teaching programme, however large or small, generates data in the form of prospectuses, handbooks or calendars designed to guide students in their choice of courses. In addition, in the process of enrolling students and keeping a record of their progress, institutions create databases of primary information. Depending upon the resources available and upon policy established within the institution, this type of internally generated data may be used as the basis for research. Such research may be undertaken for internal purposes, for example to provide data to support planning proposals, or it may be developed for use outside the institutions, perhaps as the basis of a conference paper or for some form of publication. All institutions generate data, but the extent to which data sources are exploited varies greatly between institutions.

Libraries represent a second source. Most institutions maintain libraries staffed by professionals. Libraries represent a natural focus for enquiries, but the ability of the library to deal with enquiries about distance education depends partly on the principal focus of the library and partly on the resources at its disposal. The library of a single-mode distance teaching institution, for example, may be more prepared to commit time and money to the acquisition of literature on distance education than a library of an institution in which distance education is only one of the means employed to teach students. The inability or unwillingness of the library to commit resources to acquiring literature may represent a major obstacle to the library user.

There is also a second obstacle, however, which is beyond the control of the library. This is the fugitive nature of much of the literature on distance education. Only a small proportion of the literature is in the form of conventionally published books and journals. The vast majority of documents relating to the theory and practice of distance education fall into the category of 'grey literature', material emanating in semi-published form from international and national agencies, universities, colleges and other educational institutions. Such documents include surveys, conference papers, research reports, and occasional paper series.

Given that they have the necessary funding, and in the case of developing countries sufficient foreign exchange, libraries can identify and acquire commercially published books and journals on distance education. The identification of 'grey literature' presents a quite different problem, however. The major international bibliographical database on education ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) covers distance education only partially. ERIC operates from the United States, where a very different concept of distance education is held from almost anywhere else in the world. It was in order to address the problem of the identification of distance education literature that the International Centre for Distance Learning (ICDL) began to develop its computerised database in the late 1980s. This database, greatly modified and expanded, now forms one of the components of the ICDL distance education database. The literature area of the database is now maintained at such a level that it contains information on all new literature on distance education in the English Language that ICDL is able to trace and acquire. In addition to maintaining the database, ICDL publishes and distributes worldwide a quarterly New Accessions list which contains details of new documents, including information on where to obtain them, and on forthcoming conferences, seminars and workshops. The list is used by many libraries to update their collection.

Information on the literature of distance education comprises one of the three areas of the ICDL distance education database. The remaining two areas contain information on distance-taught courses and programmes offered by institutions in Commonwealth countries and on distance teaching institutions worldwide. The course and programme area of the database has received the highest level of attention during 1990 and 1991 because it is perceived as being of highest priority by the Commonwealth of Learning

(COL). In 1989, the Overseas Development Administration of the British Government made available funding to the tune of £2 million over a five-year period for the expansion of ICDL, a documentation centre based in the Open University in the United Kingdom, to provide an information service to COL. At the end of June 1991, the resultant database contains over 8,000 course and programme entries, more than 275 institution entries and 2,500 literature entries. It is anticipated that by the end of March 1992, the database will contain between 15,000 and 20,000 courses and programme entries, at least 500 institution entries, and around 5,000 literature entries.

The collection of documentation for its library of literature on distance education and the collection of information for the distance education database represent one dimension of ICDL's work. The other dimension involves the dissemination of information. Since ICDL's principal responsibility under the terms of its present funding is to provide information to the Commonwealth of Learning and to institutions in the Commonwealth, it is necessary to provide a range of means of access to reflect the range of resources across Commonwealth countries. On-line access is available to the database, but it is well understood that any means of access which requires use of telephone lines is quite impracticable for developing countries. A much better means of access for institutions in developing countries is CD-ROM (compact disc-read-only memory). CD-ROM does not rely on telecommunications technology; replay equipment can be connected to existing IBM-compatible microcomputers. ICDL also tries to respond as quickly and efficiently as possible to all requests from institutions not yet equipped to access the database on-line or on CD-ROM.

ICDL's increasing ability to provide information on the literature of distance education brings to the fore the problem of supplying copies of actual documents. Providing database entries describing research reports, conference papers and other documents is helpful to users only if they then have access to the documents themselves. Where possible, ICDL provides photocopies. A potentially more effective solution is in the experimental stage, however. ICDL has begun to include copies of the full text of documents in the database alongside the entries describing them. There is technically no difficulty in including full texts. The major difficulty to be addressed is in dealing with issues of copyright. Since so much of the literature falls into the 'grey' area, being unpublished or semi-published,

copyright should prove to be problematic only in the case of a minority of documents.

A second experiment will also shortly be conducted by ICDL. This involves the inclusion of sample facsimile pages of printed course materials in the course and programme area. This will not be possible on a course-by-course basis because the number of course and programme entries is too great. Selected sample pages will, however, we hope, provide a useful supplement to the descriptive information already provided in database entries.

The collection of documentation and information on distance education worldwide is becoming more and more difficult as distance teaching institutions and programmes proliferate and as the literature correspondingly expands. It is our hope that more documentation centres specialising in distance education will be established in other parts of the world. To date, few other centres are operating. The International Extension College in the United Kingdom has a well-established collection which is particularly strong in African material, and the American Center for the Study of Distance Education, based at Pennsylvania State University, may well develop a collection in the future. Institutions such as Athabasca University and the Open Learning Agency, both in Canada, Indira Gandhi National Open University in India and the Hong Kong Open Learning Institute, have extensive collections, but their distance education materials are part of broader collections.

Cooperation in the exchange of information may prove invaluable in the future, particularly as centres located in countries and regions throughout the world are in a much better position to collect and monitor information than ICDL or any other single centre. Some invaluable cooperation and collaboration has already taken place: ICDL and the Distance Education Regional Resource Centre (DERRC) have already exchanged information relating to courses, programmes and institutions. It is anticipated that an agreement between ICDL and DERRC will encourage and extend such cooperation. An agreement is already in place between ICDL and the National Institute of Multimedia Education (NIME), Japan. Each organisation has been involved in the production of surveys on behalf of Unesco on the current state of distance education, ICDL's on Africa, and on Latin America,

NIME's on Asia. We very much hope that further collaborative work will also result from the experience gained in this initial project. There is no doubt in our minds that the way ahead in information work in distance education lies in sharing expertise and experience and we welcome any initiatives which point in this direction.